DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 472 CS 209 563

AUTHOR Vardell, Sylvia M.
TITLE "I'm No Lady Astronaut": Nonsexist Language for Tomorrow.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Spring Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (4th, Houston, TX, March 28-30, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Influences; Females; *Language Attitudes; Language Patterns; *Language Usage; Language Variation; Males; *Sex Bias; Sex Fairness; *Sex Stereotypes; *Social Attitudes

ABSTRACT

As a powerful tool for education, language informs, influences, discloses, and communicates. Research on the use of language has found that it also discriminates. Among the different manifestations of sexism in language are (1) the use of "he" as a generic pronoun; (2) the "generic" use of "man" as an exclusively male referent; (3) the use of "you and your wife" as an assumed exclusive readership or listenership; (4) the use of "woman" or "lady" preceding a professional description; (5) terms describing jobs or roles for either women or men that have no equivalent in the other gender; (6) descriptions of women on the basis of their physical appearance rather than their individual accomplishments; (7) word stereotypes such as "pert, blonde cheerleader," and so forth; (8) the use of animal names or attributes to label or describe both women and men; (9) the feminine personification of inanimate objects and elements; (10) the nonparallel use of labels for males and females; (11) nonparallelism in the use of titles for women and men; (12) the preferential order given to male/female paired terms in which the male term is generally listed first; (13) terms that were originally nonsexist and historically accurate that have evolved into accepted usage by both women and men, such as "mastery"; (14) sexist suffixes; and (15) terms such as "women's libber" that represent a belief, but have taken on a negative connotation. (Examples and alternatives of language use are given for each category, and a brief quiz--with answers--is attached.) (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED266472

"I'm no lady astronaut":

Nonsexist Language for Tommorrow

Sylvia M. Vardell, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

University of Houston-Victoria

2302-C Red River

Victoria, TX 77904

Work phone (512) 576-3151 (243)

Home phone (512) 576-0575

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sylvia Vardell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS209563

ABSTRACT

Language is a powerful tool for education. It informs, influences, discloses, and communicates. Research on the use of language has found it also discriminates. This paper discusses fifteen different manifestations of sexism in language and suggests more equitable alternatives. The challenge to the educator is to be clear & creative.

"I'm no lady astronanut":
Nonsexist Language for Tommorrow

The way an author uses language reveals her biases. Did that sentence surprise you with the use of "her" as a generic pronoun? If so, it dramatizes the need for an ongoing evaluation of our use of language as teachers, as we examine its potential to inform, communicate, teach, influence and disclose. Language is a powerful tool for instructing as well as for modeling proper and appropriate usage and for influencing developing attitudes toward self and others. Students are sensitive to many aspects of both the intentional as well as the incidental teaching that goes on in the classroom. The teacher's example is a powerful one in every way.

A respectable amount of research has now accumulated on the use of nonsexist language. Yet, in reviewing the actual implementation of inclusive alternatives on a wide scale, it becomes apparent that there is still room for improvement. Although news anchor Dan Rather may now refer to "humankind" when reporting about the space exploration program, many city newspapers still present women in positions of authority with the caption "chairmen." This sexist bias is not only subtly unequal, it is generally inaccurate since many women are now filling roles traditionally held by men. To begin changing this behavior pattern, it is first necessary to be aware of the inequities and to be familiar with alternative usages before one can incorporate nonsexist language as a speaking and writing habit.

What follows is a brief introduction to a surprising variety of commonly used sexist terms and phrases with specific alternatives suggested.

Quiz

First, evaluate your sexist language quotient.

In Standard English usage, which of the following are usually examples of sexist language?

YES	NO		
___	___	1.	The average student worries about his grades.
___	___	2.	chairman
___	___	3.	you and your wife
___	___	4.	woman doctor
___	___	5.	gal Friday
___	___	6.	Gold Meir, "a dumpy, doughty lady with drab
___	___	7.	pert, blonde cheerleader
___	___	8.	hen-pecked husband
___	___	9.	Fill 'er up!
___	___	10.	men and ladies
___	___	11.	The President and Nancy
___	___	12.	boys and girls
___	___	13.	bachelor's degree
___	___	14.	actress
___	___	15.	women's libber

This test has been rigged! Each one of these examples is generally used in a sexist manner. An examination of how these terms and phrases are exclusive quickly reveals just how broad based sexist language is.

Examples and Alternatives

1. Probably the most commonly recognized example of sexist usage is "he" as a "generic" pronoun. Psychological studies, however, reveal that students of all ages definitely perceive "he" as referring to the male only. An additional argument is the fact "she" is used as a "generic" pronoun only when referents are stereotypically female (e.g. nurse, teacher, secretary); "The nurse forgot her uniform." What is surprising is the number of alternatives available to "The average students worries about his grades." Some may seem more feasible or natural than others, but at least there are a variety of options to choose from. These include:

	ALTERNATIVES
a. using both "his or her" (s/he)	The average student worries about his or her grades. The average student worries about her/his grades.
b. pluralizing the subject	Average students worry about their grades.
c. singular subject/plural pronoun	The average student worries about their grades.
d. changing the subject to 1st or 2nd person	As an average student, you worry about your grades. As average students, we worry about our grades.

e.	using the word "one"	An average student worries about one's grades.
f.	using the word "it" (when appropriate)	Who is it? I believe it was Jim. It's a girl.
		An average student worries about its grades. (?)
g.	rewording to omit pronoun	The average student worries about grades.
h.	alternating "her" then "his"	The average student worries about his grades. The average student is anxious about her future.
i.	using plural pronoun to refer to a singular subject	The average student worries about their grades.
j.	inventing a new generic pronoun (na, ton, co, E, hesh, tey, hir)	The average student worries about na's grades.

2. For the same reasons, the "generic" use of "man" has been found to be perceived as an exclusively male referent. Eleanor Roosevelt and Jane Addams would never be referred to as great "men." There are at least three variations in the exclusive use of "man." These include:

a.	<u>"man" as human species</u>	<u>ALTERNATIVES</u>
	early man, cave man	ancestors, humankind
	mankind, forefathers	forebears
b.	<u>"man" as verb</u>	
	We asked the Girl Scouts to man the exhibit.	to run, to staff to work, to cover
c.	<u>"man" as affix</u>	
	manmade	handmade, synthetic
	man-hour	work hour
	manhole cover	utility hole cover
	spokesman	representative
	chairman	chair, chairperson
	crewman	crewmember

3. The phrase "you & your wife" is an example of an assumption of an exclusive readership or listenership. Salutations such as "convention-goers and their wives" or "you & your husband" no longer reflect the reality of both husbands and wives being actively involved in the work world as well as the home front. Alternative usages include the inclusive term "spouse" or reference to the appropriate role being addressed, for example, "you, as parents" or "you, as employees."

4. The use of "woman" or "lady" preceding a professional description is considered to be gratuitous and redundant. This is a good example of how our language no longer reflects the current social and economic reality. You would never see such a reference for a man as "male lawyer" or "gentleman banker." Rather than using expressions such as "woman doctor" or "lady attorney," the recommended alternative is simply "doctor" or "attorney" with additional use of the feminine pronoun (she, her), if necessary for clarity.

5. There are many terms describing jobs or roles for either women or men which have no equivalent in the other gender. Feminine examples include: "gal Friday," "chorus girl," and "maid;" for males: "bellboy," "paperboy," and "rifleman." For both genders, such terms are usually demeaning; for women these labels also relegate them to domestic or subservient tasks. The suggested alternative is to describe the <u>task</u> (clerk, dancer, housekeeper) for either gender rather than rely on the derogatory label.

6. One of the most insulting forms of sexist language is

that which describes women (even famous women like Golda Meir in the example,"Golda Meir, 'a dumpy, doughty lady with drab dresses.'") on the basis of their physical appearance rather than their individual accomplishments. When this is transposed to a male example, the absurdity and irrelevance is immediately apparent: "John Doe's calm, quiet demeanor and stunning physique belie the fact that he, too, hopes to finish a Ph.D. in nuclear physics." The obvious alternative is to describe both women and men by their achievements or behaviors (e.g. "Golda Meir, famous world leader").

7. Examples of sexist language which go beyond the words used, to the stereotypes assumed, include:

"pert, blonde cheerleader;"

"While she was gossiping, the soup boiled over;"

"May I have two strong boys to carry the chairs?"

If the phrase or sentence could not refer to either males or females, then it may be relying on sex role stereotypes. Gender-neutral alternatives include:

"trim, active cheerleader;"

"While, she was talking, the soup boiled over;"

"May I have two strong volunteers to carry the chairs?"

8. One of the more unusual instances of sexist language is the use of animal names or attributes to label or describe both women and men. Examples for women include: "shrew," "dog," "chick," "catty," and "bat;" for men: "bully," "jackass," "hen-pecked," and "wolf." None are flattering, all are demeaning and derogatory terms. Unfortunately, most of the terms used to

refer to women also have negative sexual connotations. The alternative is to avoid using such terminology, for either sex, describing instead the behaviors involved, (e.g. "dominated husband").

9. The feminine personificiation of inanimate objects and elements is another example of sexist language. Cars, ships, hurricanes, Mother Nature, and even nuclear power plants have been referred to as "she" or "her." All have violent and destructive aspects which do not positively represent femaleness. In fact, when weathercasters began alternately naming hurricanes female/male, there were fewer comments such as "the hurricane flirted with the coastline." The logical alternative is to use the pronoun "it" or "its" when referring to all inanimate objects.

10. Sexism also exhibits itself in the nonparallel use of labels for males and females. Terms such as "ladies" or "girls" are often used to describe adult females. The term "men," however, is consistently preferred for adult males. When these labels are paired, the inequity becomes obvious. Examples include:

"men and ladies"

alternatives: "men and women," "gentlemen and ladies"

"Three university students - two girls and a man - were abducted from a research station."

alternatives: "two girls and a boy," "two women and a man"

11. Nonparallelism also manifests itself in the use of titles for women and men. Examples and alternatives include:

The President & Nancy	The President & Nancy Reagan
	The President & First Lady
Governor Carey and Mrs. Grasso	Mr. Carey and Mrs. Grasso
	Gov. Carey and Gov. Grasso
Dear Sir	Dear Sir/Madam
	Dear Reader (Colleague)
	Dear (Job title, company name)

12. Probably the subtlest form of sexist language is the preferential order given to male/female paired terms in which the male term is generally listed first. Other examples besides "male/female" include: "boys and girls," "husband-wife," "his or her," "men and women," and "Mr. & Mrs." A few examples exist of an initial female term: "ladies and gentlemen," "bride and groom," "mother and father," and "aunt and uncle." These pairs, however, are limited to polite, family-related terms. A reasonable alternative is to simply vary the order naturally.

13. Some sexist terms were orginally nonsexist and historically accurate: "bachelor's degree," "master's degree," "workman's compensation," and "sportsmanship." Such words and phrases initially referred only to men. Some have evolved into accepted usage which include both women and men, such as "mastery" and "fellowship." Available alternatives, however, include: "baccalaureate degree," "graduate degree," "worker's compensation," and "fairplay."

14. Sexist suffixes offer substandard variations of words

which are not inherently male. Examples include: "authoress," "actress," "aviatrix," and "majorette." Terms such as "poetess," and "Negress" are thankfully archaic. Others such as "majorette" borrow the ending "ette" indicating smallness (e.g. "kitchenette"). Neutral alternatives include: "author," "actor," "aviator," and "major" or "twirler."

15. Finally, the term "women's libber" is a classic example of a phrase which represents a belief, but has taken on a negative connotation in itself. It belittles both women and men, as well as the concept of "women's liberation." The alternative is to adopt terms which are not necessarily emotionally loaded, such as "feminist" or "activist."

Conclusion

Awareness of the value of nonsexist language is building. Many guidelines exist for its use and most major scholarly journals require it. A computer software style-checking program is even available (Grammatik, from Aspen Software) for suggesting substitutions for gender marked words. Educators have a special responsibility in this regard as they model language use for students, set standards for expectations of girls and boys, and influence their developing attitudes. The challenge of using nonsexist language is to be clearer, more descriptive, and precise. Most people find this practice revitalizes their

thinking, too. The opportunity for creativity is unlimited; language is an evolving human tool which changes as our needs change. As language influences and reflects our reality, and words begin to affect attitudes, the possibilities for change are exciting.

ANSWERS TO QUIZ

	SEXIST USAGE	ALTERNATIVE
1.	The average student worries about his grades (exclusive pronoun)	The average student worries about grades.
2.	chairman (exclusive "man")	chair, chairperson
3.	you and your wife (exclusive label)	you and your spouse
4.	woman doctor (gratuitous adjective)	doctor
5.	gal Friday (non equivalent term)	assistant, clerk
6.	Golda Meir, "a dumpy, doughty lady with drab dresses" (trivializing based on appearance)	Gold Meir, famous world leader
7.	pert, blonde cheerleader (stereotyped role)	trim active cheerleader
8.	hen-pecked husband (animal attributes)	dominated husband
9.	Fill 'er up (personificiation)	Fill it up!
10.	men and ladies (non parallel lables)	men and women, gentlemen and ladies
11.	The President and Nancy (non parallel titles)	President and Nancy Reagan
12.	boys and girls (preferential order	girls and boys, boys and girls
13.	bachelor's degree (historical)	baccalaureate degree
14.	actress (substandard)	actor
15.	women's libber (derogatory)	feminist, activist

References

Bernard, J. The Female World. New York: Free Press, 1981.

Clapp, O. (Ed.) Responses to Sexism. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976.

Kramer, C. "Perceptions of Female and Male Speech." Language and Speech, 20, 2, 151-61, June, 1977.

Matthews, M.W. "A Teacher's Guide to Sexist Words." Social Education 41, 5, 389-97, May, 1977.

Miller, C. and Swift, K. The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing. New York: Lippincott and Crowell, 1980.

Ney, J.W. "Sexism in the English Vocabulary: A Biased View in a Biased Society." A Review of General Semantics, 33, 1, 67-76, March, 1976.

Nilsen, A.P. Changing Words in a Changing World. Arizona State University, Tempe, Dept. of Educational Technology and Library Science, 1980.

Nilsen, A.P. et. al. Sexism and Language. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977.

Role: Your Own; A Handbook for Coping with Sexism in the Study of Language, Literature, and the Mass Media. Los Angeles City Schools, California Division of Instructional Plannin and Services, 1976.

Scott, K.P. "Teaching About Sex Differences in Language." Clearing House, 55, 9, 410-413, May, 1982.

Stanley, J.P. "The Sexist Tradition: Words and Meaning." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Nov., 1977.

Todd-Mancillas, W.R. "Man-Linked Words and Masculine Pronouns: A Review of Literature and Implications for Speech and Communication Teachers and Researchers." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association, April, 1980.